Introduction to Cohousing & the Australian Context

Gilo Holtzman
“It takes people to create a community...”
Preface

In the contemporary climate of housing affordability, social isolation and environmental concerns, the cohousing model seems to address all these issues and offers a housing alternative. Additionally, the existing literature suggests that residents living in cohousing communities improve their quality of life and well-being. However, the cohousing model is slow to develop as an alternative housing option in Australia. There are many factors contributing to cohousing remaining on the fringe of the culture of housing in Australia. The first aim of this paper is to present the reasons why, to date, only three cohousing communities have been established in Australia. The second aim is to integrate the existing literature on cohousing and incorporate input from leading figures in the cohousing field in Australia. My hope is that this review will become an introductory text for people with interest in the cohousing concept and that it will be used as a stepping stone for their journey into cohousing.
In this long process of researching, learning and writing about cohousing there were many who directly and indirectly contribute through their research, books and comments to the making this paper.

I would like to acknowledge firstly my family Orit and Shiloh for bearing with me while being very involved in the cohousing process. To Tamara Shatar for the editing and the members of ‘Sydney Cohousing’, Paul Osmond from the University of New South Wales. Robyn Williams of Pinakarri, Linda Seaborn of Cohousing Coop, Ian Higginbottom and Mary Jankins of Cascade Cohousing, Tony Kidd, Iain Walker & Gisele Wilkinson and the members of Cohousing Australia for their great contribution in writing the Australian Chapter.

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Part 1 - Introduction

Envisage living in a vibrant community which is environmentally aware, energy efficient. With willing, fun loving, diverse people sharing the many household tasks across the community, creating more free time to live your dreams, and reducing your cost of living! Home grown veggies! ..... (Bridges 2010)

About 2,400 years ago, the Greek philosopher Plato described an ideal community where everything was organised collectively. In 1506, the Englishman Thomas More,\(^1\) published the book "Utopia", meaning no place, which gave a name to such visions. In More's ideal community, people were to live in neighbourhood groups with common dining rooms and various shared leisure facilities. His description of an ideal community was a way to criticise the existing society.

"The concept of cohousing is not new, it has roots in utopian, feminist, pre-industrial western societies, where small communities used to live and sustain themselves by sharing resources, property and aspirations" (Meltzer 2005). What was new, however, was the implementation of this old idea in a new context and in a new way which allows cohousing communities not only the benefits of larger social interaction but also to support each other easing the burdens of daily life (Lietaert 2009).

Cohousing first took roots in Denmark in the mid 1960's, expanding almost simultaneously but independently in Sweden and Holland where it became an established housing model. The term, “cohousing”, translated from the Danish word bofælskaber meaning 'living together’, was first introduced in 1988 in the book “Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves” by two American architects, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett who became acquainted with the cohousing concept while living and studying architecture in Denmark.

In the cohousing model, the community residents own their own homes (or rent) but also have a share in the ownership of communal space and the common

\(^1\) Thomas More , 1478–1535, also known as Saint Thomas More, was an English lawyer, social philosopher, author, and statesman. More sketched out his most well-known and controversial work, Utopia 1516, a novel in Latin. In it he describes the political arrangements of the imaginary island country of Utopia. Utopia contrasts the contentious social life of European states with the perfectly orderly, reasonable social arrangements of Utopia and its environs (Tallstoria, Nolandia, and Aircastle). In Utopia, with communal ownership of land, private property does not exist, men and women are educated alike, and there is almost complete religious toleration. Some take the novel's principal message to be the social need for order and discipline rather than liberty. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_More#Utopia (accessed may 2010)
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house, where community activities occur. Although community participation is encouraged, the extent to which residents participate in their community is entirely voluntary.

The separate income resource allows household autonomy and preservation of the ‘private’ within the community. Resident’s financial contribution of about 10%-15% of their total budget allocated for the community allows for extensive common facilities where the common house is the heart of the community and shared common meals a few times a week bring the community together.

1.1 What is Cohousing?

Cohousing is short for collaborative housing; it is also a form of ‘Intentional Community’, an inclusive term for Eco-Villages, Cohousing, Community Land Trusts, Communes, Student Coops and urban Housing Cooperatives.

Mazo defines Intentional Community as a living environment where doors don’t need to be locked, where significant relationships with neighbours are the norm rather than the exception, where generations mix and everyone has a role, where people experiment with commitment to something more than their individual interests. As a term, Intentional Community refers to a group of people who intentionally organized aiming to create, build and live in a community; this empowers them to live their way and improve their lifestyle and well-being.

Some of the characteristics attributed to cohousing as identified by McCamant and Durrett (p.38-41) include: participatory process; intentional neighbourhood design; common facilities; complete resident management; together with “the encouragement of human interaction, support for disadvantaged members of the society, and the awareness of the environmental concerns” (George 2006). While these principals are not exclusive to cohousing and can be attributed to all types of intentional communities, The three characteristics that set cohousing apart from other intentional communities (although some other communities
may include a variation of one of them) are; non-hierarchical structure, shared ownership of communal resources and separate income.

Points of difference between Co-op, Cohousing or Eco-Village and standard estate development include: (Rounsefell)

• Working with the differences between individual and collective ownership and lifestyle.
• Deciding whether to prioritise finding land or community and timing of purchase (given the potential holding costs for a 1-5-year process).
• The challenge of finding your community for a niche market.
• Challenge of adapting the eco-social concepts behind Intentional Community to a mainstream context.
• Challenges in finding front-end finance and ways to constrain approval and construction times while guarding social equity.
• Getting the figures to add up when a developer needing to make a profit may be constructing something previously supplied gradually and piecemeal, with low cost or recycled materials by sweat equity, in private time.
• Challenges in offsetting the extra financial and environmental costs of thermal mass and solar technology (good design is NOT necessarily more costly); poor lot orientation can make eco-design impossible (Wrigley, 2007)
• Balancing control, costs, risk and partnership with future residents.
• Coming to terms with the necessary community-building and decision making processes and finding faster ways of achieving a similar social result.
• The impact of unusual processes and strategies on development approval, seeking the goodwill of utility providers and financiers/banks in advance by including them earlier and with tighter engagement; some banks are now starting to self-promote as supportive of green development or shared equity loans.
• Understanding and acting on the urgency of providing demonstration projects of high-performance alternatives to financial, eco and social unsustainability.
In addition there are differences between different types of Intentional Community based on rural vs. urban/town or village zoning and whether on Community Title, Strata Title or Multiple Occupancy (rural land sharing community or urban land trusts):

- Development approval process.
- Likely off-site impacts.
- Lifestyle (social and employment) opportunities.
- Practical constraints.
- Provision of and accessibility to services.
- Construction costs.
- Ongoing maintenance costs.
- Community makeup etc.

And then, the usual developer questions need to be asked, such as:

- What do you get for your money?
- How much more does it cost extra?
- Are the eco sustainable practices approved by the different government?/Authorities?
- Do you have feasibility studies?
- Do you have due diligence statements?
- Do you have certified valuations?
- What supporting documentation do you have for the success of the project?
- Do you have presales?
- What is your marketing strategy for presales?
- Is this the right place to develop this concept?
- Is the raw land too expensive from the start for this type of development – is the land more suitable for something else?
- Can we make any money?
1.4 Senior Cohousing

Ageing is inevitable; it is part of the wonderful cycle of life. The concern is whether we will be able to age gracefully and respectfully? Although aiming for an intergenerational community is important and the preferred vision of most cohousing communities as it creates the balance needed for sustaining the future of the community, secular housing options where senior housing is included, is part of the existing housing market. With future concerns about housing options for an aging population as in Australia, it is important to find and adopt alternative senior housing models that will and can address these future market needs. And the needs of the baby boomers generation.

Most housing options available for seniors today isolate them and discourage neighbourhood atmosphere”. (Durrett 2009 ) Although there are varied housing options for seniors, such as retirement villages, even the most exclusive ones cannot really create or even compensate for ones will “for maintaining their comfort, control and independence”. (Durrett 2009 ) The cohousing model also allows for seniors to keep their property and pass it on as inheritance, instead of using it to pay for the other housing choices.

“One interesting observation that can be extrapolated from the European experience is that across the variety of country-specific approaches to cohousing, cohousing for the elderly is booming across Europe” (Lietaert). In Holland and Denmark since the early 1980’s and “over a short period of its
development, cohousing schemes for older people have become as common as age-unrestricted scheme” (Bamford, 2004, 2005; Brenton, 1998).

But not only in Europe, in the USA, senior cohousing is also gaining popularity with much thanks to Chuck Durrett’s book ‘Senior Cohousing Handbook’, which similarly to his Cohousing book 20 years earlier, helps people understand what senior cohousing is and how it works (W.H Thomas 2009).

Senior cohousing is not different from any other cohousing community in its process and structure, though it is much more tuned to the needs of elder citizens, both in support and design.

Figure 3: Design workshop, Silver sage cohousing US, image at ‘the Senior Cohousing Handbook’ Courtesy of Chuck Durrett.
1.2 Design and Social Structure

Cohousing communities are very complex “[t]he concept can be difficult to understand and even more difficult to operate” (J. Williams 2005). The process of production and operation requires much effort, discussions, decision making, liability, forming working regulations [constitutions], legal agreements between members, and between the members and the entity, and more. And it is mostly “outside ones experience, let alone the experience of councils and banks” (Bamford 2008).

“Resident participation in the development process is cohousing’s greatest asset and its most limiting factor. It is a huge task for a group of people, inexperienced in both collective decision making and the building industry, to take on a project of this complexity. Most residents have little knowledge of financing, design, and construction issues for housing development. They encounter problems in maintaining an efficient timeline, avoiding the domination of a few strong personalities and integrating new members without backtracking” (K. McCamant 2000).

Setting up this development structure where participants are allocated on a voluntary basis to various committees, ensures that everyone is taking part in the process.
The absence of hierarchy in many of the cohousing communities is the reason why most groups are adopting the democratic or consensus decision-making process as their governance model tool. Cohousing communities mostly adopt the consensus model, which is usually defined as meaning both general agreement and the process of getting to such agreement. By adopting consensus decision making, much debate can occur on various topics which can slow and delay the making of important decisions until an agreement is reached. To resolve and improve decision-making processes, many groups are searching for various governance models that can help them create a more efficient working system.

Recently, a new form of governance, Sociocracy\(^2\) (also known as Dynamic Governance) is being widely explored and adopted as a decision-making tool which helps groups run their meetings in a more efficient manner. Adopted from the corporate world Sociocracy, simplifies the decision making process by adopting a circle structure which is "a semi-autonomous unit that has its own aim/role. It makes the policy

\(^2\) **Sociocracy** “is a system of governance using consent-based decision making among equivalent individuals and an organizational structure. The sociocratic organization is composed of a hierarchy of semiautonomous circles. This hierarchy, however, does not constitute a power structure as autocratic hierarchies do. Each circle has the responsibility to execute, measure, and control its own processes in achieving its goals. It governs a specific domain of responsibility within the policies of the larger organization. Circles are also responsible for their own development and for each member’s development. Often called “integral education,” the circle and its members are expected to determine what they need to know to remain competitive in their field and to reach the goals of their circle”.[Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociocracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociocracy) (accessed August 1, 2010)
decisions within its domain; delegates the leading, doing and measuring functions to its own members…” [Villines, S.& Buck, J. 2007, P.75].

The important decisions, that require the majority consent, are then brought to the group in the main circle for final voting. At this stage, there is a round of response where each member can comment, agree or object. What makes this process efficient is that no additional response is permitted, hence a member can respond once without further discussions. The intent is that all discussions and promotions of ideas would be done prior to the decision-making working meeting. As a result, groups are able to achieve their visions, missions and aims in a more efficient and harmonious way.

One of the greatest challenges of any community is dealing with conflicts arising while living and working together. Conflict resolution and nonviolent communication⁵ are two examples of “a range of methods for alleviating or eliminating sources of conflict. Processes of conflict resolution generally include negotiation, mediation, and diplomacy” (Wikipedia). This not only includes the relationship between the members but also between all parties involved.

The nonviolent communication model was adopted by Pinakarri as their working process, Robyn Williams, one of the founding members, describes their way to address conflicts as ‘the be kind and be generous in your kindness model’, which is what Pinakarri’s stated aspiration “Through Pinakarri, [which means listening with undivided attention], we learn to love”, means.

“This connects and grounds us”, Robyn says. “It’s shared and mostly trusted, even when any one of us behaves badly. We’re reasonably fluent around talking about issues frankly; occasionally err on the side of holding back and value judgement, the occasional hissy-fit. I think people lean towards clearing up inter-personal issues directly, may get support for

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⁵ “When our communication supports compassionate giving and receiving, happiness replaces violence and grieving!” (CNVC founder, Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD). NVC begins by assuming that we are all compassionate by nature and that violent strategies—whether verbal or physical—are learned behaviours taught and supported by the prevailing culture. NVC also assumes that we all share the same, basic human needs, and that each of our actions are a strategy to meet one or more of these needs. [ (Rosenberg 2003)The Centre for Nonviolent Communication, http://www.cnvc.org/)]
perspective and facilitation. Crisis or chronic issues are talked out in a variety of ways. At best we do listen deeply, seeking to understand the others’ view and looking to find an outcome or resolution that is mindful of legitimate needs. We’ve trained and practiced several approaches, which have built up literacy, tools and processes, not everyone across all at any given time of course. Nonviolent Communication is an accessible and dependable model, and consistent with our intention to learn to love. We’re interested in Sociocracy at times, Restorative Justice when the grown-up kids (9 x >20-23yo) were young. As the years goes by already 10.5 years” We get better at it. There’s more experience and trust, structures become less constraining “ (R. Williams 2010).

Various theorists identify design characteristics which will promote social interaction and cohesion within neighbourhoods. Many of these features can be found in cohousing4 (J. Williams 2005).

Dr Jo Williams of the UCL Bartlett School of Planning in London studied five behaviours: social interaction, participation, community support, unity and safety in cohousing and found that design features (division of space, densities, circulatory systems and communal facilities) particularly influenced social interaction and safety. Empirical research about cohousing in the United States by Torres-Antonini (2001) also indicates that in a US cohousing community the design of cohousing helps to increase social behaviours (J. Williams 2005). Williams also suggests that the design of cohousing communities in the US was influential in encouraging greater sociability, stronger social networks and greater cohesion in cohousing especially in combination with social and personal factors (J. Williams 2005).

Social contact design (SCD) principles are used to encourage more casual social encounters and increased opportunities for informal socialising in the communities.

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4 Abu-gazzeh, 1999; Altman, 1975; Baum & Valins, 1977; Clitheroe et al., 1998; Coleman, 1990; Fleming et al., 1985; Gehl, 1987; Hillier & Hanson, 1984; Kenen, 1982; Sengul & Enon, 1990
The principles include:

* Provision of indoor and outdoor communal facilities;
* Good visibility into all communal spaces;
* Car parking outside the community or car-free communities;
* Gradual transitions between public and private space;
* Provision of semi-private outdoor spaces close to private units for socialising;
* Positioning of key facilities and access points on walkways.

It is important to note that designing for interaction alone acts only as a platform for the community to operate from and it is up to the residents to create programs which activate the community for it to sustain itself.

In the cohousing model, three development types can be identified; resident led, partnership and speculative. See Table 1 (J. Williams, 2005, p.270).

In the process of establishing a community, from community visioning, recruiting and marketing, establishing its legal entity, working through the design stages to community development and management once occupied (processes that may take years to complete), the level of residents’ involvement and control varies according to the type adopted.

The partnership type has the highest potential for groups seeking to establish their communities that do not have the capital to do it themselves. The nature of the cohousing model provides a good base for collaboration between government housing agencies, community housing associations and
developers, as it decreases the financial risks of both the residents and the developers, although the residents won’t have full control over the development and conflicts and power games between all stakeholders involved may occur.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Resident-led model</th>
<th>Partnership model</th>
<th>Speculative model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description of model</td>
<td>Entire resident group involved with the development and design process, as well as community formation</td>
<td>Partnership approach—developers and residents work together at all stages of the process</td>
<td>Developer led. Developer deals with design, development and community formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community visioning</td>
<td>All residents involved</td>
<td>All residents involved</td>
<td>Developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>All residents involved</td>
<td>All residents involved with professional help</td>
<td>Developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal structures and financing</td>
<td>Resident led with professional help</td>
<td>Developer led</td>
<td>Developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design Process</td>
<td>Resident led with professional help</td>
<td>Developer led with resident input</td>
<td>Developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community development</td>
<td>Resident led with professional help prior to living in community and throughout life of community</td>
<td>Resident led with professional help prior to living in community and throughout life of community</td>
<td>Resident led once living in community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table Source: adapted from Davis, 2001 (unpublished).

In the residential led type, as it implies, the residents are involved in every aspect of the development as opposed to the speculative one where the developer is controlling the process (which is the traditional way of building houses and is based on the market’s prices and needs, rather than the dwellers’ needs), the input of the residents occurs only once living in the community, where it can operate as strata or other title.

The notion that design can encourage stronger social networks is reinforced by environment–behaviour theorists. Environment–behaviour theory suggests that the design of housing development can impact on social behaviour of residents (see Table 4) (J. Williams 2005, p.273).
Table 4
Factors producing a sense of well-being amongst cohousers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors influencing well-being</th>
<th>Research findings</th>
<th>Research references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>Cohousers scored well against Maslow’s “hierarchical needs” (physiological, safety, a feeling of belonging, self esteem and self-actualisation)</td>
<td>[5, 7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social benefits</td>
<td>The benefits of living in cohousing include an increase in well-being resulting from increased opportunities for socializing, support, security, sharing chores, sharing expertise, living with people with similar interests, inter-dependent living. These benefits are built through a combination of social contact design and process (resident involvement in decision-making and community formation). Well-being generated through empowerment and ability to influence immediate environment and community decisions.</td>
<td>[1, 4, 6-8]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic benefits</td>
<td>Ability to share daily living expense. Cohousers highlighted significant savings in daily expenditure as a result of sharing facilities, vehicles and goods. Financial security resulting from sharing of some costs within the community. Reported higher resale values.</td>
<td>[1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health benefits</td>
<td>Sharing healthier meals within the community. Support networks for the less mobile/able within the community allowing them to live independently. Opportunities to socialise reported as being beneficial to mental well-being of residents.</td>
<td>[1]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from [1]. J. Williams / Futures 40 (2008) 268–286

Table from (J. Williams, Predicting an american future for cohousing 2005)

Since architectural design process is always about the future, successful design of a community is one that can foresee, address and adapt to the future needs of those it is designing for. Throughout history, many architects and planners have tried to design urban spaces, neighbourhoods and houses, based on various social design theories and patterns and trying to address social issues. Some succeeded while many others failed in bringing theory into practice.

Greg Bamford of Queensland University also argues that since cohousing is a grass-root initiative, “the role of the architects is not to attempt to inject dedicated common space and facilities into housing schemes in the hope that residents will discover the virtue of cohousing, but rather to extend the dialogue with clients and communities at the feasibility or briefly stage about possible futures that can work” (Bamford 2008). For this reason, the consensus model has been widely adopted as a design process, working together with the architect and other professionals through design workshops, encouraging the group to take an active part in shaping the way the community will look, which will provide extra value in designing a successful community.

What do cohousing communities look like? And what is the ideal size of cohousing communities? These are two common question asked when trying to understand the physical aspect of cohousing. The diagram below describes
different types of site plans as a generalization of cohousing communities, identified in the cohousing literature;

Although all of these types can work well if adopted, it is up to each group to find the type that best suits them and is supported by design consultancy and the site in which it is situated in. Cohousing can be built at low, medium and high densities and in a variety of layouts based on orientation, size and costs, thus communities are very diverse. Cohousing communities can consist of private units, duplexes, townhouses, or detached houses, new built or retrofit, in rural, suburban and urban settings.

Cohousing communities vary in size but ideally consist of between 12-36 households. This may seem arbitrary numbers but are based on the experiences of existing communities and their abilities to manage, operate and sustain themselves. Getting to know everyone in the community well enough to have a good social balance can be difficult if there are more households. While having fewer households might also affect the structure, the efficiency and the affordability of the community in the long run.

Concerns over global warming and sustainability are slowly being acknowledged by the mainstream. The adaptation of environmentally sustainable design [ESD] principles; adapt and reuse, water harvesting and treatment, energy savings, passive and active solar considerations, are all part of good design practice and will become standard requirements for new building in the not too far future. The big advantage of cohousing lies in the way it is structured and constructed which considers and addresses these concerns.
One design aspect that can be identified in the planning of many cohousing communities is the tendency to build in clusters. This allows for a smaller footprint of the dwelling on the site, leaving more open space for the community to share. In an era where sustainability and affordability are of major concerns, building in clusters makes more sense, as it saves on building materials, by sharing walls for example, and reduces energy costs of heating and cooling, which inevitably also relate to affordability. The grouping of dwellings together, extensive common facilities and shared amenities, inherently also encourage pro-environmental behaviour.
Comparative cohousing site plans.

Diagrams at: the Cohousing Handbook (Scotthenson 2005, p.159)
1.3 Cohousing - the Sustainable / Affordable Question

For future cohousing, sustainability and affordability are imperative for establishing successful communities. To achieve sustainability and affordability, cohousing groups will have to decide how far they would be willing to go in order to achieve it. Will they be willing to drop some important environmentally sustainable features (principles) in favour of economic or social sustainability, to build their dream homes? And how vital will it be for them to adapt to or change the way they live or at least the way they dwell, to be able to have a better quality of life?

Sustainability is defined as "forms of progress that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs." [World Commission on Environment and Development (1)] but can also be interpreted in many other ways. Affordability is more straightforward although also complicated. "Housing affordability relates to a person’s ability to pay for their housing. It is complex issue, impacted by the local housing and labour markets as well as larger economic, environmental and social forces. When people struggle to meet the cost of housing, researchers describe it as housing affordability stress" (AHURI). Affordability can be defined as "housing costs being less than 30% of household income and the occupants being in the bottom 40% of household incomes" (Disney 2007).

“Affordable housing is crucial. Without it, people are impoverished, families and communities eroded, jobs lost and the economy weakened. Affordability is now at its worst-ever level. Prices almost doubled during the past decade ... The affordability problem is by no means confined to homebuyers. Indeed, some of its deepest impacts are on low-income renters in private or public housing... Rent levels have risen relative to income for many lower-income households.
Government rent assistance has not protected at least 300,000 recipients from unaffordable housing costs” (Disney 2004). “A lack of affordability implies lack of long-term tenure or choice, undermining social diversity and equity or the ability to commit to place, hence undermining sustainability” (Crabtree 2006). Thus cohousing communities could be an avenue for changing lifestyles and adapted to meet all these challenges that we are facing today.

In the case of cohousing, affordability is conceived also as a long term prospect of improving ones quality of life and well-being. Let’s look at it this way, putting aside our care for and responsibility to our global environment and focusing on our responsibility to our families or future families, we put a lot of love, energy and money into raising our kids, with hopes that they will become confident, healthy, considerate and happy individuals. We hope that we will be able to grow and age in place, surrounded by our memories and people we love, and not in isolation or loneliness as many elders and senior citizens do. In short, have a better future. And yet everything in our current environment does not allow us to provide what we wish to.

Here are only few examples; most of the foods that we buy in local food stores are full of additives, flavours, preservatives and sugar (unless we are able to afford to buy organic products, grow it or make it ourselves); our domestic environment is full of various materials, from carpets to children’s plastic toys to paints which “contain mutagenic materials, heavy metals, dangerous chemicals and dyes” (McDonough, P.4), that are constantly emitting hazardous particles that we inhale, all this results in very serious health issues, such as cancer, asthma and allergies in kids and adults. There goes health...

The modern way of life for city dwellers is becoming more and more difficult. We hear about predictions of a 60% rise in electricity bills in the next three years in New South Wales and in other states as well, water rates won’t stay far behind. If we add fuel costs, rents and mortgages, the value of our money decreases, resulting in lower quality of life and our well being. Moreover, it will force us to work more only to maintain our current quality of life, leaving us with
less time to spend with the family and to socialise and with much more stress. **There goes quality of life...**

As for the environment, well it is enough to see where we are today “the amount of resources we use and consume, the waste we produce and the emissions we produce” (J. Williams 2005, p.16), to realise how ridiculously wasteful our consumer society is and the impact it has on the environment. **There goes the future of our future generations...**

Although cohousing in its essence is social sustainability, without the balance between the environmental & economical aspects as well, cohousing communities could not really exist as a substantial alternative housing option. Therefore the true meaning of social and affordability does not lay in how cheap we can build our homes, since construction costs vary little unless alternative or innovative construction methods are adopted. It will most likely not be cheaper than buying a new house and the cost of land is may be another barrier to affordability. Affordability lies in the adaptation of [ESD] Environmentally Sustainable Design and [SCD] Social Contact Design principles.

Resource consumption in particular appears to be an issue for smaller households. According to a growing body of research, increases in domestic consumption of space (land), energy, materials, packaging, and goods and in the production of waste are linked with an increase in small households. Thus an increase in one-person households is likely to result in a significant increase in domestic resource consumption and waste production.

The issue is not simply one of accommodation but of sustainability and the need for “new residential developments to be environmentally and socially sustainable, for domestic resource consumption and waste to be reduced, and for local communities to be re-invigorated” (J. Williams 2005 ). Significant reductions to running costs and expenses and improved social lives may be achieved through “accommodation which ideally encourage lower levels of resource consumption and waste production and greater local social capital (i.e. the 'glue' that binds people together in a community and encourages
them to co-operate with each other” (J. Williams 2005) and by creating activities that encourage social interaction rather than imposing it, such as shared meals, workshops and more. In a paper published in Futures Journal (2005), Dr J. Williams found that significant space, energy and goods savings were be made by those living in cohousing in the US. “On average 31% space savings; 57% electricity savings and 8% goods savings were achieved”. This is in addition to more quality family time during the week, improvements in social life, while preserving privacy, and increased quality of life and well being.

In relation to future development and markets, with carbon reduction schemes and the move towards ‘carbon zero’ housing and ‘carbon zero’ cities, reducing our carbon footprint and carbon emissions in the domestic realm will be the driving force for adopting cohousing as a new housing model. “With concerns about carbon emissions and energy savings, there has never been greater impetus for housing that offers low-carbon lifestyles. If the development models emerging in the US were adopted in the UK, the market for cohousing could be substantially expanded here. This could add to our options for shrinking our carbon footprint as well as meeting social needs, such as safe homes for an ageing population and local childcare facilities for parents who work” (J. Williams 2005, p.16).

Matthieu Lietaert in his research “Cohousing relevance to degrowth theories” asserts that the sharing and collaborating nature of cohousing communities results in less consumption and less wastage which coincide with the Degrowth movement theories. The movement back to community is the key to sustainability in western culture. Knowing our neighbours, feeling like we belong, being part of something that we care about and that cares about us – these

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5 In July 2007 the UK Government’s Building A Greener Future: Policy Statement announced that all new homes will be zero carbon from 2016. Following up the commitment in the Policy Statement to consult further on the definition of zero carbon, in December 2008 the Government published Definition of Zero Carbon Homes and Non-Domestic Buildings: Consultation. This proposed an approach based on: high levels of energy efficiency in the fabric of the home, a minimum level of carbon reduction to be achieved onsite or through directly connected heat; and a list of allowable solutions for dealing with the remaining emissions. [http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/theenvironment/zerocarbonhomes/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/theenvironment/zerocarbonhomes/) (accessed July 1, 2010)
are the elements of rebuilding sustainability in the world around us. This is acting locally (Scotthenson 2005).

Cohousing encourages pro-environmental behaviour; encourages strong social networks; are socially inclusive; increase residents’ well-being; and provide affordable accommodation and lifestyle options (J. Williams 2005). Cohousing also appears to fulfil the objectives of and adopts similar design strategies to the ‘New Urbanism Movement’ (see glossary). Although different in their scale, both New Urbanism and cohousing objectives aim to improve quality of life of residence through the physical construction of space, creating communities that are liveable, walkable and sustainable, while raising the quality of life which, again, is thought to produce more sustainable housing models (J. Williams 2005). Furthermore, cohousing, because of its structure, is related to other movements such as Degrowth7, and Transitioning8. And to some extant According to Iain Walker The cohousing model may be a “magic bullet” as a future housing type and for neighbourhoods design for mainstream housing, social housing and housing for the elderly if we compare it to any other existing models (Walker 2008).

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7 Degrowth is a political, economic, and social movement based on environmentalist, anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist ideas
8 Transition Towns is a worldwide movement of ordinary people finding ways of being sustainable and resilient for the health and wellbeing of our children, ourselves and our planet. It can be applied to whatever kind of community you live in: suburb, city, town, village or even an island.
“From the moment I first entered a cohousing community, it was apparent that I was in a special place”. (Durrett 2009)
The cohousing model has evolved and changed rapidly through time and experience, since it first appeared more than 40 years ago in Denmark. During this period three development waves can be identified:

**Wave 1**, 1960s and 1970s in Northern Europe, pioneering communities evolved out of political activism and a search for better housing options and support for working families.

**Wave 2**, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s in North America; cohousing emerged in the US after the publication of the cohousing book by McCamant & Durrett in 1987. Since 2000 cohousing communities have more than quadrupled.

**Wave 3**, Europe, USA, Pacific Rim -Australasia and South-East Asia. The current wave is characterised by the addressing of issues including accessibility and affordability; green architecture and ecological habitation; adaptability and responsiveness to suit regional and cultural differences. (J. Williams 2005)

This chapter provides a brief introduction to cohousing in Europe and the USA, their history and development to present. The case studies were chosen specifically to demonstrate the versatility of cohousing communities in different settings and models which may be learnt from and adopted in Australia.

*Figure 12. Danish cohousing model as applied in America. A) Munkesøgård cohousing site plan, Roskilde, Denmark, 1999. Source:: East Lake Commons brochure, Atlanta, GA,1999.*
2.1 European Cohousing

In Europe, cohousing developments can be divided into two groupings: the Scandinavian countries, led by Denmark which pioneered cohousing about 40 years ago, where central living and collaborative living developed out of a local context and needs. Cohousing in Sweden and Holland varies in form, size and ownership, however still holds some similarities to the Danish model. The second group of countries, where the cohousing model has been adopted only in the past few years, consists of France, Spain, Belgium, the UK and Italy (Lietaert).

In Italy, cohousing has especially benefited because of two types of cohousing organizations that have emerged in the last few years and mass-media marketing. The first, Cohousing Venture, is closer to the U.S. model of a cohousing consultancy firm. The second are cohousing organizations that are non-profit companies. All provide resources and guidance to families that wish to take part in creating a community. La Commune di Bagnaia is one of many examples of groups seeking living alternatives outside the cities (there are many deserted small villages and farms that provide great platforms for redevelopment to meet the needs of these new communities). In La Commune di Bagnaia, the members pooled their resources and so were able to run several agricultural activities – they had livestock of all kinds, a crop-dusting plane (for organic substances) and other farm-based machinery. They sold their local produce from their vineyard, olive trees etc., which allowed them to sustain their community. While some worked on the property full time, others went out to work in jobs (Lietaert).

The Italian case is nevertheless interesting as it illustrates the flexibility with which cohousing operates, namely that it can be adapted to people’s desires, needs and financial means.
2.1.1 Danish Cohousing [bofaellesskaber]

In Denmark, bofaellesskaber (directly translated as “living communities”) emerged due to frustration over housing options (which, in a way, is very similar to our own housing issues more than forty years later) and out of the need to find solutions for social problems “of the late 20th century and post-industrial society” (Meltzer 2005). The first cohousing community was built in 1972 for 27 families, close to Copenhagen.
“After initial scepticism, cohousing has won the support of the Danish government and financial institutions” (Milman), to become part of mainstream housing option, and today about 5 % of the Danish population – more than 100,000 people – live in cohousing.

In its form, Danish cohousing is comprised mostly of low density, single family houses, or attached dwellings one- to two-storey high, with a separate common house. The common house is usually located at the centre of the site or the entrance. "Commonly, the architecture takes a neo-vernacular character, its layout, form and materials being derived from rural building traditions” (Meltzer 2005, P.7). Communities range “in size from 6 to 80 households, with the majority between 15 and 33 residences” (D. &. McCamant 1997).

2.1.2 Swedish Cohousing [Kollektivhuse]

In Sweden the idea of cohousing (Kollektivhus) has a long and fascinating history. In different periods, various models for more neighbourly housing with shared services have been launched. These models have been motivated sometimes by social and political visions and sometimes as practical solutions to the needs of day-to-day life (Vestbro 2008). "The major motivation to build these
houses in the 1970s was of a political nature. It was part of a large societal project of [an] active welfare state and the state invested a lot to make this happen” [Bjorn Palmqvist9] [Lietaert]. It was influenced as well by the Swedish feminist movement that played a key role in the 60’s in promoting cohousing as a way to share common chores more equally between the genders.

Unlike Denmark, cohousing in Sweden has not evolved to be a significant housing alternative. The majority of cohousing communities are located in urban settings, usually in the centre of the big cities, built as medium to high rise apartment’s blocks and are state-owned. The common house and joint facilities are located somewhere in the building. There are just over forty cohousing units that exist in Sweden, which represent a minute fraction of the housing stock (Lietaert) and most Swedes are unaware of housing alternatives such as cohousing and eco villages. Today, Kollektivhus housing is becoming more popular due to an active collaboration with SABO – the umbrella organisation Swedish Association of Municipal Housing Companies (Lietaert).

9 Bjorn Palmqvist, a resident at Stoplyckan, the biggest cohousing community in Sweden, as quoted from an article “The growth of cohousing in Europe”, by Matthieu Lietaert.
Since 2004, the collaborative housing movement has gained momentum, seven new units have been built and some more are in the planning stage. In 2006, there were 42 listed cohousing communities in Sweden. Of those, twenty five are running more or less according to the original ideas while seventeen are not using all the original collective spaces. Thirty are owned by municipal housing companies, while six are cooperatively owned and six have special tenure forms. (Vestbro 2008) “In a few cases the cohousing communities share some spaces with a school, a day-care centre or facilities for the elderly and one community combines collaborative housing with eco-village features” (Vestbro 2008).

The first building was at Bergsjön, Gothenburg in 1979 and it was also the first to use the “BIG model”10. This area was a so-called problem area, with many social problems and apartments that changed hands often or stood empty. Professor Lars Ågren, the architect who had designed the area in the sixties, offered the landlord, a municipal housing company, a solution for the unoccupied apartments by transforming a building into cohousing, inspired by

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10 Big Model: [Bo I Gemenskap] presented the idea of a “Working together model” which inspired a number of new co-housing projects. The BIG group turned away from the idea that housework was something to be kept to a minimum. Instead BIG argued that women had had throughout history a positive contribution to society and family life, by applying their skills in housework and financial housekeeping. Housework was only undesirable when it was a service carried out every day by a woman in a diminishing household. Moreover, cooking less often but for more people would become something to tackle with enthusiasm. Working with other people would in itself be stimulating. Eating from five to ten meals prepared by someone else would save a lot of valuable time before it was one’s own turn to work in the kitchen.
the “Big model”. The company was actually not interested in cohousing, but gave Ågren a chance to carry out his idea. He advertised in the newspapers and soon had an enthusiastic association which worked together to rehabilitate the building. The sixth floor was chosen for the majority of the collective spaces. The building was to be run by the residents but still municipally owned (Vestbro 2008).

![Figure 18: An overview of various types of collaborative housing, as analysed by architect researcher Karin Palm Lindén. 26 units are grouped into 20 types classified according to spatial distribution of communication and communal spaces in relation to private apartments. Image at “History of cohousing – internationally and in Sweden”, pdf. by Vestbro, Kollektivhus.nu](image-url)

The first building in Stockholm of the new model was Prästgårdsstagen in Älvsjö. In this case, the idea was taken up by the municipal housing company. Many of the residents who moved into Prästgårdsstagen formed an association that participated in the planning of the building, following the BIG model. The apartment area was reduced by about ten percent to allow generous collective spaces without increased construction costs. The building was provided with a central kitchen, dining hall, laundry, music room, workshops,
kids play room, meetings rooms and more (Kollektivhus NU). The municipality ran a kindergarten in the building. Every floor had a collective room not dedicated to any particular activity. It could, for example, be used for informal meetings, as a place to share magazines or as a room for young people. The first cohousing units had staff employed to arrange meals and take care of laundry where private housing companies took the lead (Vestbro 2008).

2.1.3 Dutch Cohousing [Centraal Wonen]

In the sixties, a new generation of communities were started by mostly younger people who sought new perspectives on society and on personal relationships” (Bakker 2009 , p.1). The idea of cohousing (Centraal Wonen) first appeared in the early seventies and the MW2 projects11 (Environmentally and People Friendly Living and Working - Mens- en Milieuvriendelijk Wonen en Werken) came a few years later. In the ‘80s, communities for seniors were developed and, around 1990, came the idea of building an eco-village (Bakker 2009 ). Today, there are more than 100 “Centraal Wonen” projects and about 230 seniors cohousing (living groups of

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11 MW2 in Den Bosch is an example of Collective forms of living as developed in Holland since the 1970’s ; Workspaces, a communal garden with a playground, parking solutions and bike stalls, hobbies or guests, secure and/or accessible spaces for the handicapped, extra investments in sustainable energy and materials for a healthy and economic living environment. Especially the combination of living with working and other facilities creates an urban quality which otherwise doesn’t come into being. , Holland, http://base.china-europa-forum.net/rsc/docs/a_089collectively_commissioned_housing.pdf [accessed June 24]
the elderly) which appeared in the eighties, to meet the needs of the growing population of 50-plussers.

Figure 20: Dutch Cohousing Layout Diagrams. Image at “collaborative communities:” by Dorit Fromm 1991.

The Netherlands have created a cohousing model, which is based on the organization of large cohousing communities comprised of 30 - 70 units in clusters of 5 - 10 units (half of the cohousing projects in the Netherlands are subdivided into clusters). Each of these has its own common facilities where residents share meals in small and intimate groups and there is one commonly shared building for parties, meetings and the like.

Most cohousing projects consist of rented houses, normally owned by housing cooperatives, which are wide-spread in The Netherlands, and almost all new cohousing projects are initiated by people with little or no real cohousing experience but are attracted by the concept and ideals. Similar to the Italian and American communities, there are 60 Cohousing projects that come under the umbrella of the LVCW which provides services to those people. “There are also projects with a mix of owned and rented homes and some with only owned homes” [LVCW].
2.1.4 Springhill Cohousing UK

Springhill Cohousing represents wave 3 type of cohousing development with much focus on sustainable design principals. Located near the centre of Stroud in Gloucestershire, it is the first new-build cohousing scheme to be completed in the UK. There are 34 units, on two acres; ranging from one bedroom flats to five bedroom houses and 12 studio units, some of which have been amalgamated to form maisonettes (Springhill Cohousing).

Approximately 75 people are living in Springhill, including 25 children, ranging in age from 3 days to late 70s, a mix of single men and women, couples without children, single parent families and families with up to 4 children. There is also a three-storey common house with a kitchen where meals are shared three times a week (Springhill Cohousing).

The site in Stroud was bought on September 2000 by David Michael “who then went about gathering a group around him who all became Directors and shareholders in the limited company that was to own the site. By September that year, when Contracts were exchanged, some 15 households had signed
up, each paying £5,000 for 5,000 £1 shares” (which makes 30% pre-sold) (Comfort 2008). The Building work started and on August 5th 2002. The first residents moved in, in the summer and autumn of 2003 (Springhill Cohousing).

“We are required to do 20 hours community work a year, consisting of deep-cleaning the Common House, looking after the boundaries, and other maintenance tasks. We have a very low turnover (4 units in 3 years), with most movements occurring within the community; only one home made it onto the open market. If we wish to sell, we have to give 28 days notice to the freehold-owning company of our intention to do so at a certain price (which we choose) and they have the right to put forward people from the waiting list to make an offer, which we are not obliged to accept, however. When homes change hands, they do so at around 15% to 20% premium over similar properties in Stroud. By being our own developer, we have gained from the notional 20% developer’s profit and the value of our homes significantly exceeds the build cost” (Comfort 2008).
2.2 Cohousing in America

The cohousing idea made its way to the U.S. in 1988. “In America, the idea has been seen by many as a backlash to the isolationism prevalent in modern subdivisions and a way to bring everyday amenities closer to home” (J. Williams 2005). However, according to Dr Jo Williams, cohousing has been slow to take off in America because the movement is often funded and planned almost exclusively by individual citizens. Now, however, the study says more and more developers are looking to either collaborate with interested homeowners or even speculatively build cohousing communities.

Cohousing in the US typically comprises private living units (houses or flats) with shared spaces such as a gym, office space, workshops, laundry facilities and a cafe. Those living in cohousing consume nearly 60% less energy in the home, and operate car-sharing and recycling schemes that greatly reduce the pollution from travel and landfill. Having facilities such as office space, workshops and a gym within the community also reduces travel and associated emissions. Residents’ direct involvement in the management and maintenance of these communities has also led to the adoption of more energy-efficient systems and renewable sources of energy (J. Williams 2005).

Williams also says that, until recently, cohousing has occupied a niche market in the US, largely because the development model adopted has been resident-led. The time, money and effort required to invest in such a project, along with the associated risks, has very much restricted market interest. It takes a minimum of five years to develop a cohousing project, the drop-out rate is high and projects can be expensive.

However, new development models have emerged in the US that reduce resident involvement, risk and cost – namely, partnership, speculative and retrofit models. Developers are beginning to finance and build cohousing both in partnership with prospective residents and speculatively. Residents are also forming their own cohousing communities in existing neighbourhoods, by taking
down fences, creating communal facilities and taking on the responsibility for general management and maintenance. And in the last decade the number of communities choosing to retrofit, or tear down existing barriers like fences in order to establish community space, has tripled.

2.2.1 N Street, Davis California

“N Street Cohousing is a nurturing environment that offers a practical use of shared resources, cultivates personal relationships, and welcomes diversity. While there is an individual level of responsibility to the community, the community acknowledges personal choices and needs” (N Street Cohousing).

N street Cohousing in Davis California was unique in its process of development "because it takes one existing house at a time and adds it to the community by the simple process of taking the fence down” (Staniford). The detached bungalow style houses of N street were built in 1955, most of the houses throughout the years were occupied by students renters from the nearby University of California, who shared living and resources as students and some have stayed to then develop N street community even before the cohousing concept was introduced few years later.
N street cohousing was actually the first cohousing to evolve from an existing suburban setting in the US. This process started in 1984 when Kevin Wolf bought the first property then bought the second property with his partner in 1986. Since the first two houses were joined, additional houses were leased and rented by the community members to then be bought by some of the members. This action allowed the group to tear down the fences and join the back yards to create a communal space comprises of large organic garden, compost area and chickens running around. As for 2009 the community has grown to 50 adults and 14 children, occupying total of 19 houses (N Street Cohousing).

2.2.2 Swan’s Market Cohousing, Oakland California

Swan’s Market Cohousing in Oakland California is the 50th cohousing community in North America, completed in March, 2000. It is a prime example of adapt and reuse. What used to be Oakland food market, established in 1917 and closed down in 1984, remained unoccupied until 1994 when an urban

Figure 26: Swan’s Market Cohousing internal street, Image at www.swansway.com/
downtown renewal was planned. A cohousing group that formed at the time joined the developer, in a partnership for developing part of the site (Swan’s Market).

The final market development ended as a mixed-used historic-preservation project, restoring the abandoned old market building with affordable rental apartments, a cohousing community, retail, restaurants, professional offices, and the Museum of Children’s Art and there is a weekly Farmer’s Market (Swan’s Market).

The collaboration through all stages of the project, between the site developers [EBALDC], the project architect (Pyatok Associates) the Cohousing Company who worked on the site plan and the design of the common house, and with the help of the individual residents, had demonstrated the importance of the collaboration as a means to achieve successful development. The cohousing part of the development was under construction for a little more than two years which allowed all 20 families to complete the purchase of their units and moved in a relatively short time for cohousing development (Swan’s Market).

Figure 27 left, site plan ; Figure 28 bottom, Cross section . images at ‘Sustainable Community,’ by Meltzer 2005
Part 3  cohousing in Australia

“Cohousing has a very current social purchase for people who want to reduce their footprint at one level, and reduce social isolation at the same time... We want to let people know there is a whole lot of stuff happening out there on the ground. There are a lot of opportunities here”.  

(Bourne 2010)
3.1 Cohousing in Australia

In Australia, intentional communities and eco villages are known concepts. While collaborative communities, sharing and living together was always part of the pre-settlement Aboriginal communities, the non-indigenous Australian collective living started with our 19th century pioneers (Metcalfe, 1995). In the 1960s-70s it was the Nimbin “hippy” town in Northern NSW and Maleny in Queensland where co-ops and communes offered an alternative lifestyle. From the late '80s, communities such as “Moora-Moora” and “Common Ground”, permaculture communities such as Jarlanbah Permaculture, Hamlet, Crystal Waters, Aldinga Arts Eco-Village and Earthsong, and BEND Eco-Neighbourhood became established and are prime examples of intentional communities, which are now becoming a benchmark for mainstream sustainable communities.

Among various intentional community models, eco-villages have become much more popular than cohousing as an alternative for community living, mainly due to the emerging agenda of environmental and climate change. Despite the fact that the first cohousing community ‘Cascade Cohousing’, was established 18 years ago, cohousing has yet to emerge as a significant housing and community model option. Since ‘Cascade Cohousing’, not many cohousing groups have formed with even fewer that were able to complete the process to become an active community.

In fact, only two communities have become established since then: Cohousing Co-operative Ltd in Hobart and Pinakarri in Fremantle, WA. Another development that was inspired by the cohousing and eco city 12 model is the Urban Ecology Ltd development ‘Christie Walk’ in Adelaide.

Currently, Cohousing Australia is slowly forming as a national association and the people in Melbourne Victoria, Iain Walker, Giselle Wilkinson and Phil Bourne

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12 The EcoCities movement aims to demonstrate Urban Ecology at smaller scales, and gradually remodel the whole city into ecological health over a 50-100 year programme. Urban EcoVillages and Cohousing are potential components. Urban Ecology tried to established their project at a much larger scale but eventually ended up creating ‘Christie Walk’ a wonderful mini version of their vision.
are leading the way in promoting cohousing and intentional communities in Australia. The cohousing and intentional communities web site, ‘Intentional Communities Australia’ www.communities.org.au, aims to provide information and resources about communities around Australia and forming groups.
3.1.1 Cascade Cohousing – Hobart

Cascade Cohousing is the oldest cohousing community in Australia. It was built about eighteen years ago in a south Hobart suburb which sits between the city and Mt Wellington (15 minutes drive to the city). The houses were planned and built to be energy efficient and consideration of "environmental impact" was part of the process of design and construction, long before the climate change agenda and good design [esd] practice were popularised. About one quarter of the land has been preserved as an area of unbuilt space and most of this is regenerating to the natural bush of the region. (Cascade Cohousing)

Most houses were constructed from aerated concrete blocks or from timber and have two stories. All houses have good solar access from the north and many have features such as greenhouses for trapping the sun's heat. The common house and most of the paths and landscaping were built by the group (Cascade Cohousing) which also provided spaces for orchards, gardens and a chicken run. The common house includes rooms for kitchen, dining, lounge, kids, TV, guests, laundry and workshop.
Cascade Cohousing consists of 16 households with 14 titles (two houses have ancillary flats) with 22 adults and 11 children. Out of five core households, four still own their houses and 3 live there. Of the original 14 houses completed, there are now three new owners. “We run common meals three nights a week and they are still popular with 10 to 30 participants. We have 2 or 3 people who are non resident that participate” (Higginbottom 2010).

“We still think meals are key to cohousing and a "glue" that holds the community together. Most day to day things that do not need a formal meeting are decided by conversation at meals. For example social events are discussed, conflicts and issues aired, after school care organised and the like. While "business" is not the most common conversation, like in a family home, dinner allows discussion of many things in an easy atmosphere” (Higginbottom 2010).
The way we deal with conflicts has changed over time, we have had a mix of individual initiative in getting training and group work. About 8 years ago over a two year period about 8 of the adults living at Cascade Cohousing did the “Landmark Forum”. This was a turning point in conflict resolution at Cascade with many conflicts (mostly minor but some less so) between individuals in the community resolved. This changed the culture of Cascade Cohousing from one where there was difficulty in addressing conflicts to one where people had the skills to resolve conflicts as they arise. We also took on training in meeting procedure such as open space, did more facilitation training and studied some non-violent communication work. Our focus now is on conflict prevention by running visioning workshops and the like ever few years to keep clear the purpose of why we are here. We do have a formal conflict resolution procedure, but we have found that in the end this comes down to the willingness of the individuals involved to resolve their conflict. If someone refuses to follow the system, then it cannot be enforced, and if those involved are committed to reaching resolution then it really helps. Authentic communication and a willingness to look at very honestly at situations for individuals seem to be a key. Of course good procedures such as how to run meetings, general governance issues and understanding decision making processes really help” (Higginbottom 2010).
In the early 1990s my mother bought a share in Cascade Cohousing in Hobart. At that stage, the project was well under way but far from completed. They had already bought the land and some folks had begun construction. On this site, the land slopes down gently from the road, then more steeply towards the bottom. The view over Hobart is great and in the other direction the mountain looms high. The area is suburban and sits about twenty minutes from the centre of town by bike. As a seventeen year old, I was fascinated by the building process and even earned money by the hour varnishing and painting houses. There was a period of intense activity as many builders, excavators, tradesmen, labourers, etc, worked to build what they sometimes disparagingly called ‘chalets’. The common house took much longer and was built with a great deal of sweat equity. We all had a hand in digging foundations and trenches (I still remember jack hammering my hands to pieces over a pernicious boulder), laying bricks, hoisting timber framed roofs, painting, etc. While it was interesting up to a point, it was also long hard work. I think this aspect of the project could have been given to the professionals and saved the members a lot of stress. On the other hand, we did feel proud of ourselves for having finally completed it. Gradually, the muddy mess of a site was transformed with paths and landscaping into a pleasant space. The lower half of the site kept all the trees (also gained a fort and swing). One by one, people moved in to their houses as they achieved ‘lock up’. Life began at Cascade.

I lived there on and off for a period of four or five years. I ate at common meals two or three nights a week where I caught up with all the folks. (Shamefully, I was the first to forget my turn to cook and instead had to order pizza). Usually however, the cook takes the opportunity to create something delicious. Other neighbours and friends also regularly join in the common meals and roster themselves on. Quite often I would baby sit for the many young kids who lived there, help with moving furniture, or pick up some shopping on the way home for a neighbour. But mostly I remember getting a lot of help from other people. In particular I often borrowed cars (I didn’t own one), or got driven about. In time we established a chicken coop and six or so vegies patches. These things

13 [Jamie Lister is one of the founding members of ‘Sydney Cohousing’. His story ‘Living at Cascade cohousing’ was posted on January 2010 in ‘Sydney Cohousing’ blog, http://sydneycohousing.blogspot.com/ ]
are healthy and fun. These days, my kids love to pick vegies and collect eggs when they visit their grandma. They also love playing with the other kids their age who live there; these kids appear to be caring and self-reliant. I’ve seen a bunch of them at the bus-stop in the mornings, waiting for the bus that will take them to the interchange and how the older kids will make sure the younger ones make it to school and in the afternoons, the working parents roster child care duty which helps enormously Of course, eventually I moved out to be inner-city and experience independent living. Occasionally, I’d go to common meals (still do!). Life goes on. These days I live in Sydney and feel that this approach to living would be really appropriate for the urban experience.
3.1.2 Cohousing Cooperative- Hobart

The second cohousing community, also in Hobart, the Cohousing Co-operative Ltd, was formed in 1991 and completed in 2000 (Meltzer 2005, p.95), and situated only 300 meters from Cascade Cohousing. The Cohousing Co-operative, a partly government funded Community Housing Project aimed at medium to low-income households, is a joint development between the Cohousing Cooperative Society Ltd and the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services.

Cohousing Co-operative Ltd is funded as a resident managed co-operative, under the terms of the Community Housing Program (CHP), in this case an “agreement with the Housing Department, that 80% of residents must be eligible for public housing (i.e. holder of a health care card, income and asset limits etc), and the other 20% must not be home owners and must declare that their income and assets are within the limits defined by the co-op” (Cohousing Co-Operative Ltd.). Those who are eligible and become part of the community the pay, according to the CHP guidelines, 25% of their income as rent. Today though, the co-op is moving away from the tenant–landlord model of rent paying and into a more mutual model. “We call our rent a residency subscription, as technically it is a subscription that we pay to the co-op to underwrite the housing that the co-op provides us with and this is a profound difference” (Seaborn 2010).

Figure 38: Cohousing Coop street. Image at http://www.cohousingcoop.org/
Cohousing Co-operative group is comprised of 13 households, twelve on site and one in a neighbouring suburb, with 17 adults and 18 children. There are still seven adult members who moved in when the buildings were completed in 2000. The rest have either joined existing households or moved in to houses that became vacant. The group started with very solid financial practices which, according to Linda Seaborn one of the founding members, has been a blessing. Policies and procedures have evolved as different situations have arisen and it is an ongoing process.

We try to review major agreements here, like our strategic plan, or our agreements around our participation in the community, every few years. Reviewing big topics allows newer members to voice their ideas and for the norms in the community to adapt and change to include these members, and any changes in views of existing members.
We are currently developing a code of conduct/safety charter (that we started work on several years ago) and fine tuning a grievance procedure. We pay for mediation if/when needed and are looking at contracting an EAP (employee assistance program) that makes 6 sessions per year of counselling available to each resident. The co-op pays for this as a package, but does not need to authorise individuals who access it. Once a year the co-op gets a report back, particularly if there are any recurring themes that residents/members are seeking counselling about.

We find that conflict is difficult in such a close knit environment. It’s not like work, where you go home and get away from the conflict; you are confronted with it as soon as you step outside your door. This encourages a tendency to avoid conflict, which is not healthy. We hope that by providing a process for people to be able to address issues, it will help to encourage people to take well thought out approaches to solving conflict directly with the person concerned.

Our processes to date have usually been that conflict is brought to the board, that said, that really only happens once every 1 or 2 years. The process then involves a series of meetings to resolve the issue. (Seaborn 2010)
3.1.3 Pinakarri Cohousing – WA

“Through Pinakarri we learn to love more completely”

“Our community is a special place for everyone living here. A desire is needed to live in such a community, for this is not for everyone. Belonging to a group that is committed to “hanging in there” and “working through conflict” is essential. People come first. Everyone in the community has benefited one way or another, though it is the children that benefit the most. They are in a setting of a “Nuevo tribal situation” where the whole community keeps watch of each other’s children” (Pinakarri Cohousing).

Pinakarri is an Aboriginal (Nyangamarta) word meaning “deep listening”. “Pinakarri is a non-profit cohousing co-operative in suburban Fremantle, developed in collaboration with Western Australia’s public housing authority, HomesWest” (Crabtree 2006, p. 523). Pinakarri was established in 1991 and were the first community in Australia to integrate housing co-op with public rental and home ownership.
Pinakarri consists of 16 residential units (about half are cooperative renters) plus a common house. At the moment (as of 2010), there are 9 children under 18 and 25 adults; this includes Debbie who is profoundly disabled, intellectually and physically. Her household includes a cooperative care team (not counted). Sometimes people rent nearby to be more involved with Pinakarri, e.g. a young single Mum, doing ok financially, rents around the corner. The community provides a safe and welcoming place for her to visit with her young son, to play, socialise, and help out (R. Williams 2010).

The common house includes kitchen, dining room, bathroom, lounge, meeting room, guestroom and office. One of the key design features of the development was the adaptation of passive solar strategy for each individual unit. Other features in the communal grounds include permaculture gardens, an area for recycling, composting and worm farming. The community also shares; tools, appliances and pools transport (Pinakarri Cohousing).
“The original Pinakarri residential community developed from a social and environmental activist network centred around social dinners at a Perth share house” (Crabtree 2006). By creating and building the community it enabled the group to manifest their vision, “To build environmentally and socially just housing” (Crabtree, p. 524) and practise their beliefs in a deliberate and more frequent way.

Pinakarri residents were able to achieve another objective, (one that is intended by most global cohousing communities) “as a result of a conscious intent to extend the site significance and the relationship it fosters with the broader community” (Crabtree, p. 525). What at the beginning was a concern and rejection by the broader surrounding community unfamiliar with the cohousing model, fears associated with 1960’s communes, that might have a negative influence on their lives, (a point of view that is common to many other communities dealing with neighbours) “was transformed by Pinakarri residents into a trigger for community renewal and transformation... is utilised by the wider community, for meetings, dinners, film nights celebrations and forums” (Crabtree, p. 527).
3.1.4 Ecohousing Heidelberg, Melbourne

The Ecohousing Heidelberg Cohousing Co-operative, project [under construction 2010] is located in Melbourne’s inner north suburb of Heidelberg, which is less than 15 km away from Melbourne’s CBD. It is also within walking distance to public transport and shops, local parks, schools and La Trobe University. And is jointly funded by Common Equity Housing and the Victoria State Government as part of CEHL’s INFILL program, all units in this development will be managed and leased by Earth CERC. And it will provide the benchmark for affordable housing both in terms of its environmentally sustainable design emphasis and in terms of the co-housing principles upon which it is based (Wilkinson 2010).

This cooperative cohousing development is situated on ¾ of an acre lot on Bamfield Road, a low-density, single-family housing area. Comprised of 18 private self-contained apartments, all units have access to the shared common house. Located within the common house are facilities such as, kitchen, dining and meeting areas, community laundry, kids’ playroom, library, guest bedrooms, and a community garden. “Vehicles are discouraged in favour of a shared vehicle pool (Driver Owned Driver Operated DODO) covering a range of needs thus reducing the overall numbers required and contributing for the community significant reduction of greenhouse gas emissions” (Wilkinson 2010).

Figure 46, Site plan Drawings.. Image at http://www.eart h.org.au/media -release (accessed June 8 2010).

Figure 47 ECHO being built July 2010, image by Tony Kidd
3.2 The future of Cohousing in Australia

Housing in Australia is a commodity, about 70% of the houses in Australia are privately owned. Houses are built by developers and sold to customers. Developers are not interested in the liveability of a house, only its saleability and this is certainly not the same thing. The “market” encourages developers to build “McMansions” as cheaply as possible as they look like good value for money (Kidd 2010). If this approach had created better and affordable housing solutions it could have been justified but in fact it has created much bigger problems. For example, policies by governments encouraging the buying of single family homes and home ownership have created a false “Australian dream” that many people today are unable to achieve, pushing them to take big financial risks.

When you add housing shortage, land availability and housing affordability we get housing and land prices which are significantly higher than their true value. Actually, there is a lot of disagreement about whether there is a true “shortage”. Do we have people living on the streets? Or is it a shortage in desirable areas; are homes sitting empty; is there in fact no shortage? Census figures suggest no shortage. Most people who believe prices are in a bubble attribute this mainly to easy credit, other major factors are the tax treatment of investment properties (so people prefer this asset class) and an Australian belief that house prices can only ever go up (aka the “house prices double every 7-10 years” myth) [T. Shatar 2010].

Australia now has the most expensive housing in the world and this in turn is created by a number of factors. The main factor is centralisation. Australia is the most centralised country in the world with 65% of the population living in just six cities. Those cities include mega cities such as Melbourne and Sydney. There is almost no cohousing in other mega cities such as New York, Los Angeles or London. The higher prices and lower availability of land make it more difficult in those cities.

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14 This chapter was written with collaboration of Ian Higginbottom, Tony Kidd, Robyn Williams and Linda Seaborn.
“There are economical, social and culturally specific reasons why cohousing has been slow to establish in Australia” (Meltzer 2005, p.10). The political scientist Denis Altman argues “that an exaggerated emphasis on prosperity and home ownership has established “two pillars” of Australian culture – the accumulation of property and an emphasis on privacy and family life” (Meltzer 2005, p.10). In Melbourne and Sydney those who are interested in cohousing tend to live in the inner suburbs which are more expensive and land is less available. In Melbourne and Sydney government land and most land above 3000sqm is not available as it is sold to traditional developers. These developers are able to outbid any potential cohousing group and governments are not interested in supporting cohousing. This is in contrast to governments in Denmark, Holland, Sweden and even the US (Kidd 2010), “where governments have seen the advantages of cohousing in delivering the social and environmental objectives identified by the sustainable agenda” (J. Williams 2005, p.268).

Australia is in a unique and challenging position, needing to accommodate future population growth that is predicted to double? by 2050. Many new dwellings are needed, especially affordable and social housing, higher densities in inner cities and most likely, more suburban expansion. Cohousing as an alternative housing model has the opportunity to leverage by incorporating social housing strategies, (as widely adopted in Holland and Denmark) and mixed funding models. Pinakarri was the first and possibly only cohousing/co-op/intentional community in Australia with mixed funding and tenure options. However, the funding that is provided or structures that are created need to be tied with care to a clear and united sense of purpose.

Land affordability is a big issue for current and past groups trying to finance their project. Let’s look for example at Sydney’s market; if $2 million can buy about one quarter of an acre of land in many of Sydney’s suburbs, the monthly return on the mortgage/loan can reach $12,500 in interest? @7.5% $50000, therefore any delay in the construction would mean big losses and for this type of development with a tight budget would mean a death sentence to most groups even before getting to the is stage.
Ian Higginbottom claims that Land price and housing affordability are not the main reason for why cohousing has yet to emerge in Australia. “I have not learned anything about the situation in Australia (Sydney and Melbourne) that seems substantially different from similar sized cities in the US. Land is expensive, there is no government support and the house market is volatile and housing gets more expensive. If this is the case then why is Australian different?”. The main difference as Ian sees it is that in the US the process of doing cohousing and cohousing land development is very professional. They engage professionals to find and negotiate land and have good systems for marketing and group work and design and all this. In Australia we seem to want to learn it all ourselves and not learn from what has been done. Also in the US there has been 20 years of promoting cohousing by people with self interest and with community interest. There are banks who specialises in loans and financing for cohousing, cohousing lawyers and developers, and even a thesis which focuses on how to build a common house. The Australian market lacks that professional base of knowledge, “no professionals involved with cascade or other existing cohouses in Australia have seemed to want to become the Australian cohousing expert and consult to new developments” (Higginbottom 2010).

Based on almost 20 years of experience in establishing his community (Cascade Cohousing), promoting cohousing, watching quite a number of Australian groups try and fail, and from discussions with many people who have succeeded in the US and their opinions on why they succeeded. Ian also asserts that many groups were reluctant to take the steps required to overcome all the complexities of establishing a community and seek the help and support of those professionals both on the local and international scene.

“I think this is the key - value the expertise of people who have already built cohousing - get a professional mentor from the US and good local land developers”...“like some people make a lot of money out of real estate in Australia doing non-cohousing, because they learn about real-estate and become experts. Cohousers could do this too” (Higginbottom 2010).

“The time of the change agents is upon us” Says Robyn Williams of Pinakarri “and one of their roles is to network and promote. The pioneering early
adopters offer a platform of experience and demonstration, and can inform, mentor and support”. Together with learning from the experience of international communities, mainly from the US market, which is not very different than ours, we can create that professional platform that will help cohousing to grow as a valid housing alternative in Australia.

“Australia has beneficial tax arrangements that support individual home ownership and consolidate this ideal. Argues Linda Seaborn of ‘Cohousing Cooperative’, Therefore in away promoting the more communal arrangements for cohousing mean to swim against that tide, but I believe however that there is a layer of Australians who are interested in cohousing, and who would be, if given the opportunity. And the best way to promote cohousing is just building them” (Seaborn 2010).

There are two avenues in which cohousing can develop in the next few years, through the social and cooperative model and as housing for older people. The private equity avenue is still an option more as a partnership with developers rather than self developed, that is assuming that the housing market will remain unaffordable or projects will be developed at the fringe of the city where land is cheaper.

With increased promotion, more people and organisations are becoming familiar with the cohousing model. Across the country, groups are organising in an attempt to establish such communities. The few that we know about are located in north Queensland, Sydney’s North Shore, two groups in the Blue Mountains, one of them is senior cohousing and the Sydney Coastal Ecovillage, founded by Lyndall Parris, hopes to have a cohousing component within the village. In Melbourne, construction is underway at ECHO - Cohousing Cooperative and Urban Coup is now searching for suitable land. In Tasmania, after seven years, Southern Cohousing, established by Mary Jenkins (one of Cascade’s founding members) has fallen short with council disapproval of their development proposal.

The second avenue for embedding cohousing within social housing schemes will require much effort in promoting and advocating for cohousing at the governance level and consultation with various community housing providers
such as Common Equity and St George Community Housing. Shortages of affordable housing and long waiting lists mean that more funds will be allocated by the State and Federal Governments. Accessing some of this money, either directly or in partnership with one of the housing providers, may become the platform from which cohousing can develop as an important contributor to the future of affordable housing.

“Cohousing Australia believes climate impacts and a changing of community attitudes towards a more collective existence will see the move towards intentional communities take hold in the next five years, this is our intention, our hope, our dream, our vision” (Bourne 2010).
Part 4  Why Cohousing?

The cohousing literature suggests, European and US cohousing communities have a better quality of life due to a heightened sense of well-being and a more affordable lifestyle (J. Williams 2005)
Modern cities are facing increasing challenges around social isolation, population growth, housing shortages and resource distribution impacted by climate change (Bourne 2010). Managing growth, reducing traffic, creating sustainable development and sharing resources and amenities are all challenges we face today.

Within these challenges, the importance of an individual to make a change comes from one’s need to gain back the control over their way of living. For those of us living in a democratic society, the notion of freedom and choices are embedded but do we really have control over the way we live? Can we really claim that we live the way we want to, eat the food we wish to eat, choose neighbours we wish to reside by? Most likely, our contemporary lives are dictated by big Corporations (70% of the work force work for corporations). Where we live and what we eat are influenced by what we can afford and by what is sold to us. Many people are now searching for new ways to take back control over their lives. Empowerment is the means by which individuals acting collectively gain understanding of their circumstances and, in the process, gather control over their lives" (Meltzer 2005).

European examples attest to the many benefits of living in collaborative communities - security, friendship, sharing of tasks and a good environment for children (Fromm 1991). "That's all very well, but would I want to live there?" questioned a working mother at a talk on collaborative housing [in the US]. Her concerns were the greater possibility of conflict within the group and a loss of personal freedom. She is not alone in her fears of interdependence. In a cohousing community, you know who lives six houses down because you eat common meals with them ... You begin to trust them ... You listen to what they have to say, even if you don’t agree with them at first, and you sense that you, too, are being heard"(cohousing.org).
Both forming a cohousing group and living in a cohousing community and sharing space with other people are not easy. They require perseverance and persistence, tolerance and understanding. The cohousing model is complex, therefore, it takes people who are able at times to put the community needs before theirs, to look at the big picture while preserving their individuality and privacy which is one of the characters of the contemporary intentional communities. It takes people to make a change, to make a difference in their lives and in the lives of others.

If we look at the benefits of living in a cohousing community based on the US experience, we find that: economically, cohousing communities have lower daily costs due to sharing resources and energy saving. In many communities, the resale value of property was higher than equivalent property in a non-cohousing market. This is mainly attributed to the social and community factors (although the community factor may be hard to assess).

The social aspect is enhanced by providing private and extensive communal spaces and activities which “increase the social cache of cohousing communities” (J. Williams, p.276). It is also convenient and satisfying living in cohousing community as it provides the opportunity to share household chores and maintenance and entertaining and welcoming guests who can stay at communal facilities. In all “better quality of life – resulting from greater social interaction, support, security, safety, opportunities to share resources and expertise, higher resale value and increase feeling of empowerment” (J. Williams 2005, p.276).

The greatest virtue of the cohousing model does not lie in it being a better housing option than other forms of intentional communities. Other models of intentional communities provide various and diverse housing options based on the needs and capabilities of people living in those communities. But cohousing can be embedded and adopted to any existing housing model, whether as part of social housing, cooperative, residential land trust, or ecovillages. Although “cohousing is likely to attract or be realised by a relatively small minority of housing in any country, ... its broader influence on
housing, neighbourhood and urban design generally, has been significant, at least in Denmark” (Bamford 2008).

“Cohousing communities can be regarded as an old-fashioned neighbourhood, bringing together the value of private homes with the benefits of more sustainable living, which means common facilities and good connections with your neighbours” (Cohousing org). In the contemporary urban environment, individuality, isolation, and exclusiveness are eminent. What used to be a common setting, where neighbours knew each other and supported each other, is no longer the case and today it’s rare to find the same sense of belonging and participation in the local micro environment. “Cohousing is not a way of living for alternative people but an alternative for ordinary people” (Bamford, 2004; Meltzer, 2005, p.5-6). “All in all, cohousing communities stand as innovative answers for today’s environmental and social problems” (Cohousing org) and an avenue for changing lifestyles and adapting to the challenges we are facing today.
1. **What is Cohousing?**
   Cohousing is a form of collaborative housing that offers residents an old-fashioned sense of neighbourhood. Residents know their neighbours well and there is a strong sense of community that is absent in contemporary cities and suburbs. Cohousing communities consist of private, fully-equipped dwellings and extensive common amenities, including a common house and recreation areas. Residents are involved in the development of the community so that the community reflects their priorities.

2. **What are the Defining Characteristics of Cohousing?**
   **Participatory Process**
   Future residents participate in the design and development of the community so that it meets their needs. Some cohousing communities are initiated or driven by a developer which may actually make it easier for residents to participate. However, a well designed, pedestrian-oriented community without resident participation in the planning may be "cohousing inspired," but it is not a cohousing community.

   **Neighbourhood Design**
   The physical layout and orientation of the buildings (the site plan) encourages a sense of community. For example, the private residences are clustered on the site leaving more shared open space, the dwellings typically face each other across a pedestrian street or courtyard, and/or cars are parked on the periphery. The common house is centrally located so that it is easy to pass through on your way home. But more important than any of these specifics is that the intent is to create a strong sense of community with design as one of the facilitators.

   **Common Facilities**
   Common facilities are designed for daily use. They are an integral part of the community and are supplemental to the private residences. The common house typically includes a dining area with a high-end kitchen, sitting area, children’s playroom and laundry and may also have a workshop, library, exercise room, crafts room and/or one or two guest rooms. Except on very tight urban sites, cohousing communities often have playground equipment, lawns, and gardens as well. Since the buildings are clustered, larger sites may retain several or many acres of undeveloped, shared open space.

   **Resident Management**
   Cohousing communities are managed by their residents. Residents also do most of the work required to maintain the property, participate in the preparation of common meals and meet regularly to develop policies and do problem-solving for the community.
Non-Hierarchical Structure and Decision-Making

In cohousing communities there are leadership roles, but no one person or persons who have authority over others. Most groups start with one or two "burning souls" but, as people join the group, each person takes on one or more roles consistent with his or her skills, abilities or interests. Most cohousing groups make decisions by consensus, and, although groups typically have a policy for voting if consensus cannot be reached, it is rarely necessary to resort to voting.

No Shared Community Economy

The community is not a source of income for its members. Occasionally, a cohousing community will pay one of its own members to do a specific (usually time limited) task but, more typically, the task will simply be considered to be that member’s contribution to the shared responsibilities.

3. If I live in cohousing, will I have my own kitchen?

You may well wonder why we have put this seemingly insignificant question so close to the top of our list. Frankly, because it is the single question most frequently asked of cohousing enthusiasts. Yes, every cohousing community does have a common kitchen but community meals are usually prepared and served in the common house only two or three times each week. Can you imagine 25 or more households each trying to separately prepare 18 or 19 meals a week in one kitchen? That would be well nigh impossible. So yes, each residence has a fully equipped, private kitchen.

4. How does cohousing differ from other kinds of shared living or from other "intentional communities?"

Some people involved with cohousing like to describe their communities as "intentional neighbourhoods" rather than "intentional communities." This is probably because the term "intentional community" frequently connotes a shared religious, political or social ideology rather than simply the desire to have much more of a sense of community with their neighbours, some of whom might be quite different from themselves. There are places where groups of families jointly own land on which several have them have built homes, but usually there are no common facilities. In many other shared living situations, individuals don’t have a lot of privacy or space where they can do whatever they want because the kitchen, living-dining, and perhaps bathroom(s) are shared. So in those situations, residents probably cannot paint walls their favourite colours, play their favourite music loud in the living room, or have a late night party without imposing on others who share their space.

We’d like to live in a cohousing group just with people who are already our friends.

We want to live in a cohousing community that's all vegan/Christian/gay/women/older people/artists/single mothers....

Well, then you’d have to find 15 or 20 more people like that who also:

1. are financially able and emotionally prepared to buy a home,
2. are able and willing to take risks and can spend a good deal of time, money and energy well before the community is ready to move into,
3. really want to live in cohousing and
4. want to live in the same area that you and others in your core group do.
   Also, most people who are attracted to cohousing are actively seeking diversity in the communities they are planning; they want to live in a community with others who are not quite so much like themselves.

5. Please tell me about common meals.
   Cohousing communities usually prepare between two and five meals per week in their common house. The meals are prepared by a team of 2-4 persons for however many eaters sign up for the meal in advance. Eating common meals is always voluntary. In a few communities cooking is also voluntary but in most cases it is not. However, there is a good deal of variation in the way the cooking (and cleanup) responsibilities are structured. Typically, however each adult is involved in meal preparation and/or clean-up once every 4 or 5 weeks, depending on the size of the community. There is also variation in how the common meals are paid for but one only pays for the meals one eats. In Cohousing Coop members are paying $4 for their meal, and in Cascade an average meal cost to the preparer about $50."
   Many of us feel that common meals (even if some people's schedules permit them to attend only irregularly) are the glue that holds cohousing communities together. A common meal may be the only time in a busy week when we get to have a real conversation with our neighbours. And if we are lucky enough to have a little extra time for some after-dinner coffee or tea and conversation, while the kids romp around in the playroom or outside if the weather is fine, so much the better.
   Many communities encourage their cooks to provide a vegetarian option at most meals, and special food requirements are respected, although not every one of them will necessarily be accommodated at every meal.

6. How are people selected to be members of a particular cohousing group?
   For the most part, groups require attendance at an orientation, regular meetings, and perhaps some involvement with a committee before a household can apply for membership. Some groups have associate memberships that require little in the way of a financial contribution but do give potential full members the chance to participate fully in the planning process and to get to know others in the group. A full membership usually requires an equity investment, part or all of which is eventually credited toward the final price of your house. This investment can range from a few thousand dollars up to 15% of the final cost of your home.
   The disadvantage of joining a group early is that your cohome may take a long time, not to mention energy and money, to materialise. The advantages are that the earlier you come into the group, the more opportunity you have to be a part of the design and planning. And you get an earlier place in the order in which units will be selected. Also, in many groups there is a financial incentive
for joining the group early in the way of a discount applied to your final house price.

7. **How is home ownership legally structured in US cohousing communities?**
   Although one or two cohousing communities in the U.S. are organized as limited equity cooperatives, most are structured as condominiums (Strata) or planned unit developments. In what is called the "lot development model," members jointly own the common property and facilities, and are the sole owners of the lot on which they build their own single family house. Sometimes they own just the land directly under their homes (the footprint), or that plus a small back or front "private" yard. In "retrofit" cohousing, existing buildings are used or renovated so that certain spaces can be used by the whole community for its common activities. The ownership structure varies considerably in retrofit cohousing.

8. **What if I want to or have to move out of the community and sell my unit?**
   Except in a cooperative, any household leaving the community can legally sell their property to anyone they choose, but some communities maintain a "right of first refusal" which means that the seller must offer his or her unit for purchase by the community or to an individual or individuals within the community before putting it on the open market. In other communities, residents sign a voluntary agreement that they will not lease or sell their unit to a person or persons who do not wish to participate fully in the community. Some communities maintain a waiting list of persons interested in being informed if a unit becomes available and it is to the benefit of the seller and to the rest of the community if everyone lends a hand in finding new owners. When it comes to resales, experience has shown that homes in cohousing have held their value or have appreciated faster than the market as a whole.

9. **I can’t afford to (or don’t want to) buy into cohousing. Are rental units available?**
   In some cohousing communities, a few individual households own homes with attached "granny" apartments that are available for rent. And from time to time, a homeowner may rent their unit for an extended period during which he or she is unable to occupy it. A few communities have (or are planning) one or more units which might be shared by two or more individuals or households. In this situation the unit might be held by more than one person as joint tenants or tenants-in-common. Alternatively, one person or household could own the unit and others sharing the home would be renters. At the present time, there is no community in which the homeowner's association owns a unit and rents it out. Renting residents usually have all the same rights and responsibilities as owners, except in matters relating to expenditure of money. Typically, renters are welcome to attend meetings and participate fully in discussions of community matters, but usually they cannot block consensus.

10. **How large are these communities and what kinds of households live there?**
    Cohousing communities in North America range in size from 9 to 44 households. Communities as large as 25 to 35 units balances development economies and social dynamics. Communities of this size are small enough so that you know all
your neighbours by wave, but large enough to accommodate a diversity of people.
Cohousing attracts a wide range of household types: single people of all ages, couples and single parents of infants, toddlers and school-aged children, couples whose children are grown, young couples without children.

11. How much does cohousing cost?
It depends on a lot of factors; location, budget, construction methods and more. Cohousing homes typically cost more than other new condos or town homes, for several reasons:
• Cohousing neighbourhoods offer generous common facilities that are unheard of in traditional attached housing developments.
• Cohousing projects typically incorporate environmentally sustainable features that cost more in the short run, although they often pay off over time.
• Cohousing neighbourhoods are built on a smaller, more intimate scale than most new neighbourhoods today.
In addition to energy savings that cohousers experience after moving in, cohousers often find that common meals and other shared costs help reduce their daily living expenses.

12. Weighing the value of community against other issues, such as location, size of unit, risk
To successfully complete a cohousing project, a community will have to come up with the one physical solution to the group’s need. The method with which this one solution will be reached is through consensus decision making where all concerns will need to be addressed and resolved. It is best to work with the individuals needs and considerations and work out solutions to address these rather than to come up with the solutions first.

i.e. Some want brick, mud-brick or strawbale walls. These are solutions. However, we should start off with the considerations first, why we want these. We want a well-insulated, solid, cost-effective building material. This way we can come up with the one solution which can accommodate as many needs as possible.

The beauty of the cohousing model is that it is a way of balancing your private needs with the communal and the public needs. The main constraints that will be less flexible will be imposed by external forces such as the local council, the legal framework or financial considerations. We will have to put our heads together and get creative.

13. How does cohousing provide for residents of different economic means?
In some states, counties or municipalities, housing developers of multi-family housing are required by law to have a certain percentage of the new units meet a standard for “affordability.” People in cohousing usually welcome this, and as a matter of fact often wishes they could make even more than the required percentage affordable. Unfortunately, unless the developer can get
public or private subsidies or grants, there is a limit to how many affordable units can be built without driving everyone else’s costs sky high.

14. What about safety and security?
   Because we know all our neighbours, we have an excellent neighbourhood watch system built in to our communities, as someone who does not belong in the community is very easily recognized. If your child falls off a swing when he or she is out of your immediate sight line, another adult will surely pick him or her up. Then there’s more than one person to watch out for the property of an absent resident. “All eyes on the common areas” means that even in quite an urban area, many cohousers will feel comfortable leaving their front door unlocked when they go to the common house to pick up laundry, and will not require that their community be accessible only thorough a locked gate.

15. How Do I get started?
   Contact us by mail: http://www.communities.org.au/sydneycohousing@gmail.com, or another association or group from the state you live in. Let us know who you are, where you live and whether you wish to join an existing group or would like to start one in an area of interest to you and we will try to help you make contact with the relevant people.
Glossary

- **Eco-village** - an intentional settlement, usually larger in number of households than cohousing, “which integrate a supportive social environment with a low impact way of life” (Global Eco-Village Network). “human scale, fully featured communities, both urban and rural, that are integrated harmlessly into the natural environment and can successfully continue into indefinite future” (Gilman 1995, 12).

- **Community land trusts** are established to provide low- and moderate-income families access to affordable housing while conservation trusts protect environmentally, historically or culturally valuable places. Land trusts are also in place to protect farmland and ranchland. Despite the use of the term “trust,” many if not most land trusts are not technically trusts, but rather non-profit organizations that hold simple title to land and/or other property and manage it in a manner consistent with their non-profit mission. (Wikipedia)

- A **housing cooperative** is a legal entity—usually a corporation—that owns real estate, consisting of one or more residential buildings. (This is one type of housing tenure.) Each shareholder in the legal entity is granted the right to occupy one housing unit, sometimes subject to an occupancy agreement, which is similar to a lease. The occupancy agreement specifies the co-op’s rules.

- **‘Urban Ecology’** is an umbrella term that can mean a green project or a green building, it usually regards itself as an element or a ‘piece of EcoCity’, the hoped for green city of the future that is based on an ‘EcoCycles’ concept of urban metabolism. See urbaneconomyelements.doc/, 9PerfCharsVanN.doc/ and www.arch.umanitoba.ca/vanvliet/sustainable/contents.htm/

- **Sociocracy** “is a system of governance using consent-based decision making among equivalent individuals and an organizational structure. The sociocratic organization is composed of a hierarchy of semiautonomous circles. This hierarchy, however, does not constitute a power structure as autocratic hierarchies do. Each circle has the responsibility to execute, measure, and control its own processes in achieving its goals. It governs a specific domain of responsibility within the policies of the larger organization. Circles are also responsible for their own development and for each member’s development. Often called “integral education,” the circle and its members are expected to determine what they need to know to remain competitive in their field and to reach the goals of their circle”. (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociocracy, accessed August 1, 2010).

- **Nonviolent communication** – a way of communicating that leads us to give from the heart. As NVC replaces our old patterns of defending withdrawing, or attacking in the face of judgement and criticism, we come to perceive ourselves and others as well as our intentions and relationships, in a new light. Resistance, defensiveness, and violent reactions are minimised. (Rosenberg 2003)

- **New Urbanism** is strongly influenced by urban design standards prominent before the rise of the automobile and encompasses principles such as traditional neighbourhood design (TND) and transit-oriented development (TOD). (Kelbaugh, Douglas S. 2002. Repairing the American Metropolis: Common Place Revisited. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 161.) It is also closely related to Regionalism and Environmentalism. As quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Urbanism
Degrowth is a political, economic, and social movement based on environmentalist, anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist ideas. Degrowth thinkers and activists advocate for the downscaling of production and consumption—the contraction of economies—as overconsumption lies at the root of long term environmental issues and social inequalities. Key to the concept of degrowth is that reducing consumption does not require individual martyring and a decrease in well-being. Rather, 'degrowthists' aim to maximize happiness and well-being through non-consumptive means—sharing work, consuming less, while devoting more time to art, music, family, culture and community. Economic Degrowth for Sustainability and Equity. (2009). http://www.degrowth.net/Economic-Degrowth-for

Transition Towns (also known as Transition network or Transition Movement) is a movement that originates from a student project overseen by permaculture teacher Rob Hopkins at the Kinsale Further Education College in Ireland. The term "transition town" was coined by Louise Rooney[1] and Catherine Dunne. Following its start in Kinsale, Ireland it then spread to Totnes, England where Rob Hopkins and Naresh Giaigrande developed the concept during 2005 and 2006.[2] The aim of this community project is to equip communities for the dual challenges of climate change and peak oil. The movement currently has member communities in a number of countries worldwide. The Transition Towns movement is an example of socioeconomic localization. 1. http://www.localplanet.ie/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=191&Itemid=49 2. The Guardian - Article on Transition Towns as quoted in Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transition_Towns [accessed June 10]

An autonomous / self sufficient building is a building designed to be operated independently from infrastructural support services such as the electric power grid, gas grid, municipal water systems, sewage treatment systems, storm drains, communication services, and in some cases, public roads.

It is quite possible in all parts of Australia to construct a 'house with no bills', which would be comfortable without heating and cooling, which would make its own electricity, collect its own water and deal with its own waste...These houses can be built now, using off-the-shelf techniques. It is possible to build a "house with no bills" for the same price as a conventional house, but it would be (25%) smaller. (Brenda and Robert Vale)

A sustainable building, or green building is an outcome of a design philosophy which focuses on increasing the efficiency of resource use — energy, water, and materials — while reducing building impacts on human health and the environment during the building's lifecycle, through better sitting, design, construction, operation, maintenance, and removal.[1] Though green building is interpreted in many different ways, a common view is that they should be designed and operated to reduce the overall impact of the built environment on human health and the natural environment by:

- Efficiently using energy, water, and other resources
- Protecting occupant health and improving employee productivity
- Reducing waste, pollution and environmental degradation.
- This approach implies that one has to:
- identify the project’s environmental impacts during their whole lifecycle,
- encourage urban and architectural decisions that will favour daylight, include bioclimatic principles, ensure a good thermal insulation of the whole building envelope while respecting the law in force,
- use low energy ‘ecological’ or ‘natural’ building materials during the manufacturing process, the transport and the actual use of these materials,
- use building techniques that will rely more on labour than high energy,
- favour renewable energy and/or low pollution combustors,
favour ‘intelligent’ equipments: “low consumption” lightning and electric household appliances, an efficient heating system with the right dimensions.

- The cluster members committed themselves to respect a charter including the different above principles.

- **zero carbon** new homes, based on high energy efficiency, on- or near-site carbon reduction, and allowable solutions for dealing with the remaining emissions. (from UK Policy Statement 2007).

- **zero energy building (ZEB) or net zero energy building** is a general term applied to a building with zero net energy consumption and zero carbon emissions annually. Zero energy buildings are autonomous from the energy grid supply - energy is produced on-site. This design principle is gaining considerable interest as renewable energy is a means to cut greenhouse gas emissions. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero-energy_building]

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5. Kathryn McCamant & Charles Durrett, Creating Cohousing; Building Sustainable Communities. [2010]
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14. Jack Reed, “Co-op Villages”
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19. Lucy Sargisson and Lyman Tower Sargent, "Living in Utopia : New Zealand's Intentional Communities
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20. Cohousing Canada

These are just few representatives out of many cohousing and intentional communities and informative web sites.
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Image Caption

Cover Images from left; working meeting, Sydney Cohousing, cohoz at Cascade Cohousing; Australia Cohousing stall at SLF Melbourne; Pinakarri Cohousing; Design workshop, Silver sage cohousing US. Image at ‘the Senior Cohousing Handbook’ Chuck Durrett.

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